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AUTHOR Bowd, Alan D.
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ABSTRACT

Problems in educating children of minority cultures are examined with particular application to Australian Aboriginal children. Three models (the remedial, the supplementary, and the instrumental) for educating culturally different children are contrasted, with the instrumental model (in which the content and techniques of the school are used to meet the aspirations of the native community itself) seen as being preferable. The models are applied to the various approaches for teaching standard English to Aboriginal children. The author identifies the following positive trends in contemporary Aboriginal education: training of teachers specializing in Aboriginal education, changes in curriculum to include Aboriginal studies for all Australian children, the development of relevant language and reading programs, and changes in curriculum content and methods by teachers of Aboriginal children. (DB)

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The Education of Australian Aboriginal Children In Cross-Cultural Context*

Alan D. Bowd
University of Victoria

Aboriginal people first moved into Australia, probably by way of a land bridge from Asia, about 30,000 years ago. By the time of European settlement, a mere 200 years ago, there were about 600 Aboriginal tribes totalling about 300,000 people and using about 300 distinct languages (or 600 dialects) (Australian National Commission for UNESCO, 1973).

The effects of white encroachment upon Aboriginal languages have been called "linguistic genocide" by the Federal government's Commissioner for Community Relations (Grassby, 1976); of the original number, 202 languages have survived. No Australian language is spoken in that one-third of the continent inhabited by 90% of the population.

The destruction of Australian languages reflects the more general disappearance of traditional elements of Aboriginal cultures. In the island State of Tasmania there are no indigenous people left. The last ethnically distinct Tasmanian died over a half century ago. In contrast some Aboriginal groups in the Northern Territory and Western Australia remain who had not seen a plane before the Japanese bombed Darwin during World War II. These people still live a nomadic tribal life. However most Aboriginal people, like North American Indians, have been greatly affected by the destructive forces of the dominant white society. The nomadic hunting and fishing life has been replaced by a movement toward a marginal

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existence of unemployment and poverty in large urban centres like Sydney and Melbourne[1].

Unlike the Native peoples of New Zealand and Canada, whose land and political rights were recognized to some extent, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia have no treaties. However the wider social the political implications of the Australian government's past disregard of Aboriginal rights have now received wide recognition from the non-Aboriginal community. This has come about in large part because of political and social action by the Aboriginal people themselves.

The history of Aboriginal education represents a slow development, reflecting changes in State and Federal social policies toward Aborigines. There has been a transition from total neglect through education for assimilation in most of this century to the current object of integration into a larger multicultural society. The recent willingness of governments to recognize the rights of Aboriginal Australians to maintain their own cultures, languages and identity has many implications for the education of Aboriginal children. At the very least it implies that the function of education should be to maintain and enhance Aboriginal culture while preparing children to be able to make choices about the manner of their participation in the dominant technological society.

Three models for the education of the culturally-different child

In discussing the educational implications of psychological research involving Canadian Indian children I have previously distinguished three sets of assumptions (Bowd, 1977; Bowd, McDougall & Yewchuk, in press).

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1. This is reflected in infant mortality figures. In 1978 for the Northern Territory the Aboriginal rate was 48.1 per 1000 live births as opposed to a white rate of 9.9. The Federal health minister called this "an encouraging trend" -- the Aboriginal rate in 1977 has been 74.6

I call these Remedial, Supplementary and Instrumental education.

Remedial education: This is assumed when the tasks of the school are conceptualized in terms of correcting deficiencies in the child. Children may be called "culturally deprived", "socially impoverished" and said to be suffering from "linguistic deficit" or "developmental delay" as a consequence of supposedly "inadequate" environmental stimulation. Remedial notions still characterize the thinking of some educations working with Native children in both Australia and Canada. Early intervention is the natural corrolary of this approach.

Supplementary Education: This model supposes that instructional methods should complement the child's style of learning. It implies a process of mutual adaptation between the child and school in which the ability assets he brings with him are capitalized upon, as well as weaknessess corrected. Remedial educators, on the other hand, assume that the child must be changed; so, for example, they have advocated behavior modification to increase verbal output, eye-contact and hand-raising in culturally mixed classrooms with little regard for the customs the child brings with him to school (e.g. Ray, 1976). However, those assuming a supplementary model imply that education involves adapting the classroom to meet the child's needs. Judith Kleinfeld (1973) has shown the effectiveness of methods of altering the classroom behavior of teachers (speech and non-verbal cues) so that Eskimo children perceive the school environment as more warm and supportive. This change facilitates their participation in classroom activities.

Instrumental education: The third model calls for a radical reorganization of education so that the content and techniques of the school become

"instrumental" in meeting the social, economic and cultural aspirations of the Native community itself (Scribner & Cole, 1973). This means that the school system should be under the control of the people whom it directly serves, and that its subject matter and activities reflect the social and physical reality confronted by pupils out of school.

Language in Aboriginal Education

Remedial, supplementary and instrumental assumptions are clear when the role of language in Aboriginal education is examined. There are also some close parallels between the experience of Australian Aboriginal and North American Indian peoples.

For much of this century an explicit goal of education with regard to Aborigines was the eradication of Native languages. In most mission schools in the Northern Territory before 1950 the vernacular was forbidden. Although after that date there was a rapid growth of schools under the Commonwealth Office of Education, it was not until the late 1960's that "integration" rather than "assimilation" became federal policy. With that change came the first official recognition that Aboriginal language and culture be as much a part of school experience as white culture and the English language (Sommerlad, 1976).

Aboriginal children outside of the Northern Territory attend public school administered by the separate State education departments (there are no local school boards in Australia). Until recent years the formal content and methods of instruction for Aboriginal children were no different than those for the white middle class urban child. The consequence for most Aborigines was no education at all. For example, in New South Wales which is the most populous and industrialized State, by 1973 less than 10%

of Aboriginal children progressed beyond grade 8 while an incredible 55% were classified as "slow learners" (Nurcombe, 1976).

"Language deficit": The notion of "language deficit" is part of the wider pernicious concept of "cultural deprivation". It is based on the belief that white, middle class speech habits represent a standard or norm, and that differences constitute deficiencies. Individuals who think this way usually favor early intervention with compensatory remedial programs have no input from Aboriginal people and ignoring the validity of non-standard language dialects. At a recently reported conference on Aboriginal education it was argued, for example, that Native children:

> ...suffer only from the effects of cultural difference and if given the appropriate compensatory type programs can be expected to perform something like their Caucasian counterparts... There is no real reason why an Aboriginal child cannot perform... as effectively as any normal (sic) child (Craddock, 1976, pp. 37-39).

Most Aborigines speak a dialect of English which is regarded by too many white teachers as inferior or incorrect. (In Aboriginal English "you went" would be expressed as "you bin go" for example). Aboriginal English, in fact, is as grammatically complex as the standard form which teachers inculcate in the classroom. Teachers fail when they regard standard English as "right" and all other forms as "wrong" because the only criterion for using one dialect as opposed to another is "appropriateness of the social situation" (Brumby, 1976). Aboriginal children are not going to begin attempting to converse with their family and friends in Standard English because the teacher says it is "right". Children need to learn two dialects for use in different social settings, and to value them both. The concept of "linguistic deficit" is reinforced by psychologists who report low scores for Aboriginal children on tests like the Peabody Picture

Vocabulary and the I.T.P.A. without reference to dialect differences and culture-bias (Taylor et al., 1972; Nurcombe, 1976). Teachers who may be unaware of the limitations of such tests are likely to erroneously conclude that many Aboriginal children have "little language ability".

Bilingual education: An important recognition of the significance of the child's own dialect in education is represented by the Van Leer Language Development Program of the Queensland Department of Education (1971). This program emphasizes that teachers be familiar with Aboriginal English and avoid derogating or patronizing its use. The objective is for children to become proficient in two forms of English, using each in the appropriate place. Despite the programs widespread use there have been criticisms that it retains assumptions of cognitive and language deficiency (Gardiner, 1977). For example, learning Standard English in additon to Aboriginal English is assumed to "facilitate cognitive development, ... and foster personal enrichment of their lives" (Queensland Education Department, 1971).

Teaching Standard English as a Second Dialect (TSESD):

The development of the Northern Territory Bilingual Education Program during the early 1970's was based on the principles of teaching English as a second language. This meant that for Aboriginal children living in communities retaining their native tongue education could represent an experience according equal respect to English and the vernacular.

However, most Aboriginal children outside of the Northern Territory do not speak a native language. In large measure the school's failure to educate these children rests upon a communication failure across dialects, and a widespread ignorance among teachers regarding the validity of the

Aboriginal English dialect. Recently TSESD programs have been advocated in Australia, in which a major premise is that:

> the child should retain his (her) first ... dialect and that this should be used as a resource for learning Standard English, so that he can function within the wider community if he so desires. Such programs are also concerned with the totality of the child's experience, that is, with Aboriginal culture, values and aspirations, rather than as in the past, exclusively aimed at inducting Aboriginal children into the European-Australian community (Gardiner, 1977, p. 166).

Contemporary trends in Aboriginal Education

The history of Australian Aboriginal education, like that of Native peoples in Canada, has been marked by inadequacy and failure. The failures and inadequacies and shortcomings continue and are inexcusable. There are, however, along with them, some promising contemporary developments and I should like to conclude by summarizing these.

* Training of specialist teachers: Several innovative programs in Aboriginal teacher education at federally funded colleges of advanced education have appeared during the late 1970's[1]. In addition there are short-term programs for training Aboriginal teacher aides. However the numbers of Aboriginal teachers in the field remain dismally small.

* Changes in curriculum for all Australian children: State education departments now include Aboriginal studies as part of the normal curriculum for all children. For example, in New South Wales the basic aim of Aboriginal studies is "to understand, appreciate and respect Aboriginal culture" (NSW Education Department, 1976), although unfortunately the emphasis is upon the traditional way of life rather than the contemporary.

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1. For example, the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program of the Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education in Western Australia.

*The development of relevant language and reading programs: While most special education programs for speakers of Aboriginal English have been based upon the remedial "deficit" model (Gardiner, 1977), developments like the Van Leer program, the Northern Territory bilingual program and proposed TSESD programs are encouraging. The language experience approach to the teaching of reading, using the child's own vocabulary in the context os his own activities, has gained widespread acceptance.

* Changes in curriculum content and methods by teachers of Aboriginal children: Among methods of instruction having more relevance to the culturall-mixed classroom which are gaining ground in Australia are: approaches emphasizing cooperative work groups, discovery methods, outdoor education and a general de-emphasis of rigid time scheduling and individual competitive and narrative methods. To quote one Aboriginal kindergarten teacher:

> Perhaps one of the most popular activities that the children love doing at Jigalong is our nature walks. This includes collecting beetles, lizards, children identifying small animal tracks, and gathering berries... To me this is a terrific way of learning from one anothers. Another thing that happened was that the children staged a corroboree. They started by themselves and they were dancing around. We carried this on a bit further with my aide. I told her to give the children some tapping sticks and blocks so that they could tap together and produce sound. After this went on for a while we took off the children's tops and put some bright coloured paints on them. The children thought this was marvellous and carried it off very well (Churnside, 1977).

The changes that are occurring in Australia represent a transition from a wholly remedial model to the supplementary model of education for culturally different children. In Canada the most important current trend in Indian education is the beginnings of Indian control of Indian education. This makes it possible for educating to become instrumental to the needs and aspirations of the people it is supposed to serve. So far

this hope has been realized for only a scattered number of Indian bands across Canada, and not at all for Indian people living off reserves.

In Australia the control of their children's education by the Aboriginal people themselves will be more a formidable goal, not because of greater prejudice or discrimination, but because of the more centralized organization of education and the slowness of governments to recognize Aboriginal cultural and political aspirations, particularly in regard to land and treaty rights.

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